



SOME WORDS ABOUT...

FOOL (*afron*)

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From time to time someone reads the Gospels carefully enough to be uneasy about the fact that in Matt. 5:22 Jesus is quoted as saying "whoever says 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire" yet in Luke 1:40 he addresses the Pharisees and says, "You fool! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also?" This looks remarkably as if Jesus were using a double standard.

The fact is, of course, that the two words translated as "fool" in English are different in Greek. The word in Matthew is *moros*; the word in Luke is *afron*. They have remarkably different meanings and usages. The first might almost be translated as "moron" and it implies that the person doesn't show the slightest common sense. A parent might use the word to a child who had done something incredibly stupid or a person might use the word to a friend who was on the verge of doing something that would wreck his life. But it was not a word to be used merely to express anger. Some radical inconsistency in one's thinking or conduct would have to call for such a word.

So Jesus is telling his hearers not to insult people and call them morons just because of a quarrel.

In Luke the word *afron* is well translated as "fool" if we mean by that term someone who is stuck in a role and plays that role even when it is not socially or spiritually healthy to do so. The New Testament understands the word *afron* in that sense. Thus *moros* means a person who usually acts sensibly but has acted stupidly, while *afron* indicates a person who acts consistently according to a stereotype.

Therefore, a fool, in the New Testament, is one who has a tight set of opinions which are self-validating and which imply a line of conduct not informed by the will of God. Where God is considered at all, that person assumes that God approves of the consequences of those opinions.

The practical effect is that the fool embraces the language, customs, and

values without doing much thinking about them. The rich man in Jesus' parable (Luke 12:13-21) was a fool because he acted according to the stereotype of a rich man. His only hope was to get more wealth. He had learned the technique of making money and he was content to repeat his old successes over and over.

Jesus' Use

The one group of people whom Jesus called fools were the legalists who combined a special method of rabbinic interpretation of the Torah with a pious insistence that people conform their actions to the conduct implied by that interpretation. They had let dedication to their method obscure the will of God. To Jesus such people were substituting erudition for a genuine response to God. And the socially poignant aspect of their activity was that they avidly taught others to use the method and to value it above all else in life. Their ritual religion usurped honesty, morality, and godliness. Because they accepted the values of their class without thinking about what God had said was really important, they were fools.

Jesus' use of the word *afron* shows that he regarded being a fool as being sinful. The parable of the rich fool was told not to denounce wealth but covetousness. And even covetousness was not thought of in terms of violating one of the Ten Commandments but as placing a wrong value on life itself. The important thing was that a "man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

The situations Jesus addressed were not such as we are likely to face. And the situations in which we might call someone a fool are not the sorts of situations in which Jesus used the word. We do not use the word as he did. His fools might be our civic leaders. Our fools could be his disciples. There was one rich young man who was not such a disciple as to give away all of his money to the poor.

Paul's Use

Paul comes closer to the comic medieval use of the word. He says, "I'll show you what a fool is." And then he imitates his enemies. We do not know how much he exaggerated their pomposity in parodying them but we can see the character of those he ridicules. At the same time we can see that Paul had material for outdoing the fools in their foolishness. The most extended passage is in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 11 he sets the stage by announcing in verse 1 that he will imitate the fools.

In verse 12b, Paul tells his friends that he is going to put on a show for them. There follow (11:22-12:10) lines which too often we read with a straight face. Now it is true that Paul is stating facts here, but it is most improbable that he wanted them received for their informational value. We should try to imagine—as the Corinthians probably did—the words accompanied by costume and gestures. Thus Paul walks on stage wearing a long fringed prayer shawl and shouts, "Are they Hebrews? So am I!" (As we read the words we should imagine the Pharisee of the Pharisees exaggerating his Jewishness, burlesquing his piety.) "Are they Israelites? So am I! Are they sons of Abraham? So am I!" And then he changes his role, "Are they slaves of Christ?" (Doffs the prayer shawl and mimes carrying a cross.) "I am more! In prisons more often." (Shakes imaginary prison bars.) "Beaten more often." (Cringes and flinches.) "Died more often." (Drops down dead. Gets up and drops down again.) And so on through the rest of the script, you are to imagine Paul playing the fool.

Then in 12:11-13 Paul steps out of the role of a fool and speaks his epilogue—and Shakespeare could not have done it better.

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